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ON THE LOOSE

By John Lofton

Rather lets Castro off hook in drug interview

The opportunity was golden: In one corner was Dan Rather, the man CBS has hailed in full-page newspaper ads as "America's No. 1 newsman." In the other corner was this hemisphere's No. 1 Communist thug, Fidel Castro. But it was no contest. Mr. Rather was embarrassingly unprepared.

Leading in to his interview, Mr. Rather says Mr. Castro was "willing, even eager" to cooperate with the United States and other countries in stopping international drug trafficking. But, he says, Mr. Castro "vehemently denied" his government, or anyone in it, has had anything to do with narcotics profiteering.

Following this, Mr. Rather is shown in Havana asking Mr. Castro about charges that Cuba is involved in the worldwide drug trade. A wildly gesticulating Mr. Castro says there are "no drugs" in Cuba. Charges that drugs come through Cuba from Latin America are "a lie" and "absolutely false," he says.

Mr. Castro says Cuba has "the cleanest history in the field of drugs." Cubans have been "practically the guardians of the Caribbean," he says. Mr. Castro says he does not know of "a single case"

where a Cuban official was involved in the drug business — "never" in 26 years!

Later, Mr. Rather notes that in hours of off-camera conversation, Mr. Castro said three times he wanted to help stop international narcotics traffic. In fact, says Mr. Rather, he said "he was willing to shoot down some drug-running airplanes over Cuba if he got help in identifying such aircraft."

This is a classic example of a major American journalist being manipulated by a communist. Evidence that Cuba is in the international drug

trade up to its eyeballs is overwhelming. But Mr. Rather confronted Mr. Castro with none of this evidence. And no one familiar with this evidence was allowed to cite it

on this CBS news report.

For example, the Cuban American National Foundation has issued a report titled "Castro and the Narcotics Connection." It concluded: The Cuban Government "is directly involved in the production

and trafficking of narcotics with the goal of promoting addiction, violent crime, corruption, and obtaining hard currency;" the Cuban Government's narcotic profits "are used to finance and promote terrorism throughout the Americas;" and "Cuban intelligence agents (DGI) entered the United States during the Mariel boatlift and have established a narcotics trafficking network."

This study is based on extensive Senate and House hearings, the indictment of four senior Cuban government officials for alleged involvement in smuggling of narcotics into the United States and declassified reports by the State and Justice departments. It includes the following exchange between Sen. Paula Hawkins, R-Fla., and former U.S. ambassador to Colombia, Thomas Boyatt, in April 1983:

Sen. Hawkins: "Could four senior members of the Cuban government be involved in drug trafficking without the knowledge and approval of Fidel Castro, in your mind?"

Ambassador Boyatt: "No, Ma'am."

This study also cites the testimony of Mario Estevez Gonzalez, a former member of the Cuban intelligence service, who in April 1983 told Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y., that Cuba has a network of thousands of agents within the United States who are engaged in multimillion-dollar drug trafficking. Mr. Estevez, who says he turned over to the Cuban gov-

ernment more than \$7 million from the sale of drugs in the United States in 1981 and 1982, says: "It doesn't matter what moves in Cuba or takes place in Cuba, nothing gets done in Cuba unless it has the blessings and the price set by Fidel Castro himself."

This study quotes Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs James Michael as testifying in June 1983: "We have a report that the Communist Party Presidium and specifically Fidel Castro, in early 1979, considered a scheme to begin dealing with narcotics smugglers using

Cuba as a bridge and support base for the networks to the United States as a means to aid Cuba economically and to contribute to the deterioration of American society."

Ironically, on the CBS Evening News on April 30, 1984, correspondent Rita Braver reported on federal investigations into an alleged partnership between fugitive financier Robert Vesco and Fidel Castro whereby Colombian cocaine smugglers would use Cuba as a safe harbor and Cuba would use drug money to illegally acquire high technology and arms shipments from U.S. sources for export elsewhere. This report also included a summary of cases where the U.S. government had verified American-Cuban drug connections.

On the very day CBS broadcast Mr. Rather's interview with Mr. Castro, March 19, 1985, Sen. Jeremiah Denton, R-Ala., chairman of the subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, told a hearing which oversees the budget of the Drug Enforcement Administration:

"We continue to receive information that suggests that a strong bond has been forged between drug traffickers and terrorists. Testimony provided at previous hearings has established ties among the Cuban government, terrorist organizations and the drug market. Recent efforts of this subcommittee have developed additional information we believe shows direct linkages among

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terrorist organizations, the Cuban government, the Nicaraguan government and drug traffickers."

This is not all of the compelling evidence concerning the Castro drug connection. Many U.S. officials would have been eager to show Mr. Castro up for the liar he is. But they were not put on the air by CBS.

Vice President Bush's chief of staff, Adm. Dan Murphy, who also runs the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System, says that what Mr. Castro told Dan Rather was "overacting."

In an interview, he told me: "We have direct evidence, and have cited it publicly, that Cuban officials are involved [in drug trafficking]. They let planes carrying drugs fly over their country and they let ships car-

rying drugs go through their waters."

Adm. Murphy says that if Ron Schlesinger, the CBS reporter who interviewed him, had asked him about what Mr. Castro said to Mr. Rather he would have said:

"This doesn't jibe with our evidence. We have direct evidence that traffickers have used Cuban waters — the islands south of Cuba — to unload and reload marijuana shipments destined for the U.S. We have tracked aircraft laden with drugs across Cuba. And we know they were laden with drugs because we intercepted them and could see the drugs through their windows.

"We have watched these planes dump marijuana into the ocean, turn around, fly back over Cuba and disappear. So the evidence is there. And there's no way you can deny it."

Adm. Murphy says he would have said this to Mr. Schlesinger, but he was not asked. He says he was asked about the possibility of sharing information about drugs with Mr. Castro, replying: "I said this was not necessary because he knows where the hell it is [this drug trafficking]. And all he has to do is stop it."

Mr. Schlesinger tells me he thinks he did ask Adm. Murphy about Mr. Castro's remarks to Mr. Rather, "but Adm. Murphy may have a better memory than I do." In any event, Mr. Rather's report did not include Adm. Murphy saying any of what he told me.

Robert Feldkamp, head of public affairs for the Drug Enforcement Administration, tells me that he was called by CBS on this drug story. He says he told CBS's legal correspondent, Fred Graham, "We think Cuba is institutionally involved in drug trafficking. We think Mr. Castro has to be aware of that or he is sleeping with his head in the sand." Mr. Fel-

dkamp says that Cuba "has allowed its waters to be used for safe havens for drug trafficking from Latin America to the U.S."

Mr. Feldkamp says Mr. Graham asked him whether Mr. Castro was cooperating with the United States in trying to restrict the flow of drugs. He told Mr. Graham, "No, we have no knowledge of this whatsoever." And, he says, he told Mr. Graham he knew of no letter Mr. Castro

is supposed to have written offering such cooperation.

Mr. Graham says that Mr. Feldkamp did indeed say this to him. Mr. Graham says Mr. Feldkamp told him that the U.S. government has an indictment that alleges Cuban officials have been involved in drug trafficking. But, Mr. Graham says, he did not report these comments by Mr. Feldkamp to his superiors at CBS because he was told to ask about Mr. Castro's alleged letter offering to cooperate in restricting the flow of drugs.

Demanding that I quote him as saying he didn't trust me, Mr. Graham said — when I asked him if he was aware of the enormous amount of evidence implicating Cuba and Mr. Castro in the international drug trade — "I don't know."

Bob Symms, a spokesman for the National Security Council, tells me that in September 1983 Cuba sent a note to the United States saying there were unauthorized flights over Cuba, probably of planes carrying drugs. But, says Mr. Symms, "in October of that year, we wrote back asking for more information about these suspect aircraft and the Cubans never replied."

Commenting on Arnaud de Borchgrave's appointment as the new editor-in-chief of The Washington Times, Lars-Erik Nelson, Washington Bureau Chief of the New York Daily News, is quoted in The Washington Post as saying: "He's a very talented and courageous guy, but he seems to me to have gotten hung up on a philosophy that the KGB has become the dominant influence in American journalism through disinformation or suppression of vast numbers of stories about a communist plot."

Well, now. Mr. De Borchgrave has never said the KGB has a dominant influence in American journalism. But Mr. Rather's disgraceful interview of Fidel Castro is certainly an astonishing example of the suppression of a major communist plot to use drugs to destroy America.